

## **BANGLADESH IMAMS ENGAGE COMMUNITIES TO FIGHT HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

**WASHINGTON, FEBRUARY 27 --** "Initially I did not know about trafficking and I didn't realize that our Holy Quran provides instructions against human trafficking. But after training I found the issue is discussed in the Holy Quran, just in a different manner," explains Mawlana Ruhul, chair of the Chakoria Imam Association. He is one of 1,600 imams, or religious leaders, participating in Bangladesh's fight against human trafficking.

Most women and children trafficked from Bangladesh are forced into prostitution, domestic work and strenuous labor, particularly in textile factories. Boys are often trafficked to Arab states to become beggars or camel jockeys.

Although exact numbers on trafficking in Bangladesh are unavailable, estimates put the number of women and children trafficked annually at 10,000 to 20,000. Trafficking also occurs across Bangladesh's borders in India, Pakistan and certain Middle Eastern countries.

This trade -- a modern form of slavery -- results in unimaginable mental and physical abuse, loss of human dignity and violation of countless human rights. It violates national and international laws against rape, torture, abduction and murder. It also has significant public health consequences, putting many women and children at risk of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases and thus condemning them to a painful death.

Recognizing the influence of Islamic religious leaders in Bangladesh, in 2002 the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), through local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), began to provide training for imams in the country's southwestern village of Chakoria in mobilizing their communities to combat trafficking.

During their Friday prayer recitations in mosques, imams involved in the project talk about the problem of human trafficking and discuss methods of preventing it. They also organize village gatherings, lead community watchdog groups and reach out to help rescued victims.

Traditionally, many imams have a deep-seated mistrust of development agencies and "criticize working with NGOs as an anti-Islamic notion of work," Mawlana Ruhul says. But by linking anti-trafficking efforts to the teachings of Islam and being able to show positive changes in communities, the project has helped to build trust between the imams and the NGOs.

Ruhul and other imams now lead efforts to build a network of imams in the 20 districts most affected by trafficking. Those districts have since experienced a noticeable decline in trafficking rates.

"Working against trafficking of women and children is our moral and spiritual obligation," says Ruhul.

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*(Distributed by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)*

**GR/ 2007**

Note: A Bangla translation of this article is also available from the American Center. If you are interested in the translation, please call the American Center Press Section (Tel: 8837150-4, Fax: 9885688; e-mail: [DhakaPA@state.gov](mailto:DhakaPA@state.gov); Website: [http:// dhaka.usembassy.gov](http://dhaka.usembassy.gov))